

# The English Department as Imperial Commonwealth, or The Global Past and Global Future of English Studies

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## 1. The Rise of the English Department in the Age of British and American Empire

“I can’t look at the English and American worlds, or feel about them, any more, save as a big-Anglo-Saxon total, destined to such an amount of melting together that an insistence on their differences becomes more and more idle and pedantic” (Edel 1980: 244). So wrote Henry to William James on October 29, 1888. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, as challenges from both continental Europe and the United States to British imperial supremacy became more pressing, several prominent Britons argued that the United States and Great Britain should reunite and combine their

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formidable strengths to establish an unassailable world empire. In the late 1890s, A. V. Dicey, distinguished constitutional theorist, advocated common citizenship for Britons and Americans (Dicey 1898: 441–45).<sup>1</sup> In 1898, in a work titled *The Reunion of Britain and America*, the Scottish American industrialist Andrew Carnegie argued that a union between Britain and the United States was more important than a federation of Britain and her settler colonies and the best means to guarantee future Anglo-Saxon world domination. “The American remains British,” Carnegie asserted, “differing less from the Briton than the Irishman, Scotsman, Welshman, and Englishman differ from each other,” and thus “A reunion of the Anglo-Americans, consisting to-day of one hundred and eight millions, which fifty years hence will number more than two hundred millions, would be unassailable by land by any power or combination of powers that it is possible to create” (Carnegie 1898: 9, 12). And in 1901, the newspaper editor and campaigner William T. Stead published *The Americanization of the World; or, The Trend of the Twentieth-Century*, a considered argument for a reunion of the two states, a merger in which the British would have to swallow their superiority complexes and anti-American prejudices and reorganize their administrative and economic systems on more modern American lines. Though the British, Stead allowed, might manage to keep some of the more picturesque elements of their aristocratic and monarchical traditions, to integrate a great republic and an imperial state, it was the latter that would inevitably have to change most. The English might have managed for centuries with an unwritten constitution and a hereditary House of Lords and Established Church, but even in Ireland, Scotland, or Wales, there was little support for these institutions, and Britain’s colonial dominions already possessed their own more American-style constitutions and parliaments. To secure their empire with American integration, it was the British state, therefore, that would have to renovate, and Britons who would have to accept that “the mould and future destinies of our race will be American and not British” (Stead 1901: 20).<sup>2</sup>

Anglo-Saxon racial enterprise and supremacy were fundamental to these visions for a twentieth-century world ruled by British and American collective might. However, the question of culture was inseparable from that of race, and appeals to a common pride in a shared English language and literary heritage were critical too to notions of a white Anglo-American

1. For wider context, see Bell 2014.

2. On these topics more widely, see Bell 2007.

world empire formed around a community of peoples of common descent in Great Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. American Revolution and American Civil War antagonisms might have bequeathed to Britons and Americans a legacy of bitterness, but the United Kingdom, its settler colonies, and the United States nevertheless shared a common tongue, and well before political visionaries like Carnegie or Stead began to envisage an integrated Anglo-American empire, linguistic visionaries had already prognosticated the planetary supremacy of what is now called “global English.” In *Language Myths and the History of English*, Richard J. Watts notes, “A search through grammars and histories of English from around 1850 reveals, from the middle and up to and beyond the end of the nineteenth century, an increasing number of references predicting the emergence of English as a world language” (Watts 2011: 261).<sup>3</sup> In 1855, to cite one instance of this, Dublin-born Richard Chenevix Trench, later to become Anglican archbishop of Dublin in 1864, published a book titled *English Past and Present*, in which he collected a series of lectures, including “English as a Composite Language.” Trench rounded off this lecture by citing Jacob Grimm’s lecture of 1832 to the effect that English, combining the Romance and Teutonic heritages of Europe, had an expressiveness that no other language could match. “In truth,” Trench cites Grimm to say, “the English language, which by no mere accident has produced and upborne the greatest and most predominant poet of modern times, as distinguished from the ancient classical poetry (I can, of course, only mean Shakespeare), may, with all right, be called a world-language, and, like the English people, appears destined hereafter to prevail with a sway more extensive even than its present, over all the portions of the globe” (Trench 1927: 29).<sup>4</sup> For Stead, too, English as a medium shared by Britons, Americans, and the other anglophone settler colonies was also ideally equipped to be the language of universal empire. In a hyperbolic flourish that surpasses even Grimm’s or Trench’s expansionist musings, Stead argued, “As it was through the Christian Church that the monotheism of the Jew conquered the world, so it may be through the Americans that the English ideals expressed in the English language may make the tour of the planet. The parallel is dangerously exact” (1901: 3).

3. For useful general works on “global English,” see Crystal 2003; Young 2008; Ricento 2015; Horobin 2016.

4. Watts attributes the same quotation, without attribution to Grimm, to Keane 1875: 175. Cited in Watts 2011: 262.

In this view, the United Kingdom and the United States stand to each other as the Old and New Testaments, or ancient and modern dispensations of empire and progress, and in Stead's view it would be an Americanized and not the King's English that was destined to transport those "English ideals" embedded in the language around the globe. Commenting on different usages and spellings of English in the United States and Great Britain, Stead forecast, "Some day the American, with his characteristic directness and genius for going straight to the point, recognizing that the one great obstacle in the way of the universal adoption of English as a means of communication between man and man is its spelling, will take courage and reduce the language of Milton and Shakespeare to a phonetic system. The literary sense shudders at the thought of the disappearance of the familiar words, which have become indissolubly associated with the ideas they express, but from a practical point of view, the convenience of the change would be incalculable" (302). Not everyone would have found this cheerful linguistic pragmatism agreeable, and Stead could also conceive of the Anglo-American alliance in higher Arnoldian terms by arguing that a synthesis of the two countries might be mutually complementary and elevating: in this scenario, the American capacity for dynamic technological innovation would usefully kick-start a now excessively conservative British economy and administration, while the English capacity for leisured ease and cultured reflection might check and refine a crassly capitalistic American elite. Until comparatively recently, Stead argues, it was common for supercilious Britishers to argue that America had produced no literature of its own, but in fact the international influence of American letters had increased steadily across the nineteenth century and made itself felt internationally in the works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Walt Whitman, Samuel Clemens, and others. Moreover, American revivalism and hymnody had exerted an immense transatlantic influence, Stead argued, not only in English Protestantism but "throughout the British Empire." Ira D. Sankey's hymns, he opined, "still hold the first place in thousands of places of worship all around the British Empire" and "are sung much more constantly, and by a greater number of people, than any other songs, except the one exception of the National Anthem" (269). Cultural, linguistic, and military or political world domination reinforce each other in these visions of the future.

History did not take the course that the advocates of Anglo-American reunion had hoped. World War I dealt a severe blow to European imperial

ascendancy and paved the way for the eventual overtaking of British by American global supremacy exactly as the more farsseeing British intellectuals had worried it would. Nevertheless, after World War I, British imperial strategists redoubled their efforts to construct another version of Greater Britain, one that did not include the United States but focused instead on the British Dominions. In 1917, Jan Smuts, the South African statesman, coined the term “the British Commonwealth of Nations,” a usage first accorded statutory recognition in the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, when the Irish Free State was established. In the 1926 Imperial Conference in London and the 1931 Statute of Westminster, the term *commonwealth* was officially adopted to describe this new community of British and settler nations. Nevertheless, an “Americanization of the world” along the cultural, religious, musical, and other lines predicted by Stead also proceeded apace after World War I, a process in which radio and more particularly cinema, media Stead had not foreseen, would prove especially influential.

Even so, it would be wrong to think of the post–World War I or II periods exclusively in terms of mass media and cinematic Anglo-Americanizations, important though these media patently were. This is because in the period at issue here, that long interregnum when British imperial ascendancy was slowly but surely superseded by American global hegemony, was also a golden age of university building, the extension of higher education, and a concomitant promotion of “high culture.” From the middle of the nineteenth century onwards especially, new universities were opened all across the British Empire. And in the wake of World War II, as Eric Hobsbawm has noted in *The Age of Extremes*, higher education increased even more exponentially, the university as institution consistently expanding across the First, Second, and Third Worlds and extending its reach to ever-wider constituencies. Where once the universities had served only small male elites, they now enrolled ever-larger cohorts of women, lower-middle and eventually working-class students (Hobsbawm [1994] 1996: 296–301). The era of the transition from British to American hegemony, and from nineteenth-century print culture to twentieth-century cinema and visual media, was also the great age of the modern university. Moreover, this overarching transition from British to American domination was unique insofar as English was the shared language of these two successive world hegemonies. In short, the era of the decline of the British Empire and the rise of American global hegemony was also the era of “global English,” or at least of what Watts calls “the myth of global English,” and the heyday of the English department in the university

humanities.<sup>5</sup> The great reunion of Anglo-America that Stead tried to envisage in 1901 never came politically to pass—or has not yet done so at least<sup>6</sup>—but in the modern English department, something very like its platonic or symbolic form was institutionalized not only in the United Kingdom and the United States but across much of the world.

The history of the modern English department is too nationally variegated, too rhizomatically intercontinental, and too diverse in terms of the constituencies and functions it has served in the twentieth century to be reducible to the single issue of empire. However, neither can the history of English departments be dissociated from this wider late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Anglo-American imperial context. For decades now, there have been extended and urgent debates about multiple crises of English studies, these typically framed in terms of the neoliberal ruin of the university, the contraction of the humanities, canon and curriculum challenges and reforms, faculty and student diversity, the diminishing career opportunities for doctoral students in literary studies, and so forth. These concatenated crises are all serious, some acute, yet the most high-profile and widely debated studies that have addressed such topics have typically been framed in more or less exclusively American and British national contexts. And the crises debated have usually been conceived in terms of a dystopian decline from some earlier peak of the humanities, these latter charted along a line stretching somewhere between 1945 and 1989 (or 2008) before the fall into the contemporary slough of despondency.<sup>7</sup> However, what almost always gets lost in such framings of the crisis is, first, the longer and wider imperial history of the English department and, second, that department's changing institutional morphology as it has evolved during the long transition from British to American global hegemony, the latter of these hegemonies now perhaps as much in distress as its British counterpart was in the age of Dicey, Carnegie, and Stead.

5. For Watts, some of the “mythic” elements of contemporary global English have to do with ideas that English possesses a natural superiority over other languages, that all varieties of English are reasonably compatible, and that further standardization is inevitable.

6. The contemporary Brexit debates have provoked speculations about new versions of the “Anglosphere” for the twenty-first century. See, for example, Bell and Vucetic 2019. It seems possible that a rising China and Asia might force a realignment of the wider world-system and that in such context a United States in relative decline might want to forge some new relationship with the United Kingdom and its former “white” dominions.

7. On neoliberalism and the modern university, see Readings 1996; Newfield 2008; Harpham 2011; Giroux 2014; Collini 2017.

Another way to put this is to say that English studies has been the subject of a great deal of instructive, mostly constructive, debate about what should be taught in English departments, about the theories and methods that inform or ought to inform literary teaching, and about what the range and purpose of literary instruction and scholarship might be in a neoliberal epoch. Yet in all these discussions, the histories and politics of two of the most basic elements of the English department—namely, the English language itself, now apparently “globalized” and enjoying a longstanding boom rather than any “crisis,” and the structural organization of the English department qua department—rarely feature prominently. Perhaps the language that is the discipline’s basic medium and the department structures that furnish its “home” have remained so close at hand to critics worried about the future of English literary studies as to be essentially invisible. However, if the expansion of the English language across the globe and the morphology of English literature departments have now grown so familiar as to appear wholly unremarkable, it is important to remember that neither the dominance of “global English” nor the current structures of English departments were ever inevitable; there are histories to both. The more self-critically aware we are of the contingent nature of the present fundamentals of the English department, the more we may be open to changing things in the future, if change indeed is what literary scholars want.

In what follows, I propose to situate the English department as we now know it in a wider imperial context, the better to open up questions too often occluded when the unspoken premise of the discussion is how to save the English department as we once knew it, or thought we knew it. As the pages that follow will show, the structure of the contemporary English department across the world crystallized in conditions of Anglo-American world domination, and even now, after several decades of postcolonial studies and other minority discourses that have pressed questions about inherited canons and curriculum of English literature, the standard department structures still reflect that longtime Anglo-American global dominance. As English departments were established in the twentieth century in the United States, and in the various British dominions and anglophone colonies, or in countries such as India, where English was a prestige but minority language, the question of how to negotiate the relationship between “English literature” (meaning the literature of England) or “British literature” (meaning the literature of England with a handful of writers from its Celtic fringes) and the local anglophone literature (Indian English literature, Australian literature, Canadian literature, Nigerian English, etc.) sooner or later became

an issue. Everywhere around the world, English departments have long struggled to find ways to accommodate and teach both metropolitan British and their own national literatures in English.

Today, as “global English” is expanding at pace across the globe such that it is now not only the vernacular of some of the world’s richest nation-states but also the most widely spoken second language on every continent, the difficulty of marrying a specifically English canon stretching from Beowulf to well past Virginia Woolf with a whole host of what are sometimes called “new literatures in English” has obviously become far more complex. In other words, if the English department is, as most critics seem to agree, now in a state of “crisis,” that crisis has to be considered not only in terms of student enrollment or job opportunity contractions or two-tiered labor systems or new syllabi or methods but also in terms of the extraordinary “success” of “global English,” thanks not only to British and American imperialisms but also to the anglicizing pressures of contemporary neoliberal capitalism.

Before it became a “classical” language, Latin was the language of the Roman Empire, then of the Roman Catholic Church. Latin’s linguistic and literary richness was clearly connected to the administrative and sacral functions it served for many centuries and to its capacity to absorb into itself some of the richness of the many cultures the Romans conquered. But eventually “global Latin” lost its preeminence, and its hegemony was broken by the rise of the new European Romance vernaculars, the latter’s emerging literary accomplishments in turn owing more than a little to what they were able to take from the previously dominant Latin. Today, “global English” may have reached a tipping point where its remarkable planetary stretch may already be slithering into overstretch, this bringing with it remarkably difficult challenges and choices for English departments in the twenty-first century, some of which will be briefly considered in the concluding section of this essay.

## **2. From Belles Lettres Beginnings to Postcolonial Studies Endings: American Literature Barks, Other Anglophone Literatures Don’t**

As scholars such as Gauri Viswanathan, Robert Crawford, and Thomas P. Miller have shown, the formation of English literary studies as a college subject emerged initially in the British peripheries and colonies rather than England itself. In Ireland, English had been used from the time

of the Tudor and Stuart plantations in efforts to curb the Catholic religion and displace the local Gaelic language and culture. In Scotland and Ireland, pro-union intellectuals, including Thomas Sheridan, Adam Smith, and Hugh Blair, were instrumental in designing university-level courses that argued for the standardization of the arts of reading, rhetoric, and elocution or played prominent roles in the consolidation of courses in belles lettres. Provincials, Miller argues, were the first to introduce modern history, literature, politics, and ethics into higher education because they had to formalize prevailing conventions to teach themselves how to pass in a culture not their own (Miller 1997).<sup>8</sup> In India, Viswanathan has shown, the British policy of noninterference in the matters of local religions led to the promotion of the teaching of English literature, where the latter was expected to cultivate the kinds of self-improvement assigned to religious teaching in England (Viswanathan 1989). The formation of English literature as a college subject was from its inception therefore intrinsically tied to the expanding mission of Britain's Second Empire. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, when the building of modern British-style universities all across the dominions and empire accelerated, the discipline of English studies was gradually becoming more consolidated, and as these emerging universities in the empire sought to be affiliated with older and more prestigious British models, new transnational intellectual routes between the British metropolises and the colonial provinces were established.<sup>9</sup>

Initially, at least, the new universities emerging across the British Empire sought accreditation for their courses and degrees from the older British universities and the latter also supplied the colonial-settler universities with metropolitan-accredited teaching personnel. The settler and other imperial universities for their parts also sent their most promising graduates to England for higher degrees and inaugurated travelling scholarships and sabbatical schemes to allow their scholars to spend time in England and to engage with metropolitan research, or simply to absorb literary developments in "the motherland." The settler and imperial universities, therefore, were not only advancing the spread of the English language across all continents and anglicizing the local societies there—these made up not only of the indigenous peoples of the regions involved but also of quite

8. On this topic, see also Crawford 1992, especially chap. 1.

9. Standard studies on "the rise of English studies," mostly British- or American-focused, include Baldick 1983; Doyle 1989; Graff 1987; Scholes 1998. On the less-studied topic of British universities and empire, see Pietsch 2013.

diverse Anglo and Celtic settler populations with their own variants of English, Welsh, Scots, and Irish—but also establishing colonial-metropolitan intellectual career circuits, many still operative. Though the subject appears little studied, it seems likely that all this was financially lucrative for the older British universities. Presumably, they benefited not only from the widening employment opportunities that the universities in the dominions and colonies offered their graduates but also from their capacity to turn symbolic or cultural capital into financial capital in terms of colonial endowments, the global sale of textbooks and periodicals, accreditation and external examination fees, et cetera.

Indeed, it seems likely that as the new university-sponsored and quasi-meritocratic world of the modern white-collar professions displaced the older world of the European aristocracy, the traffic between the colonial and British metropolitan universities ultimately came to function as something like a modern version of the Grand Tour. Where once the wealthy or intellectually ambitious young men of England's outer anglophone peripheries and overseas colonies had made pilgrimages to see Paris or Rome and to tour the classical cultures of Italy and Greece, now they came instead from Ireland, the United States, the dominions, and the African and Asian colonies to see modern London or to study in the hallowed colleges of Oxford and Cambridge. Where the scholars, teachers, and other disseminators of culture led, young writers followed, these too treading well-beaten paths to see the cultural wonders of Paris or London, the Sorbonne or Oxbridge. Twentieth-century "English literature" from the era of Henry James and Henry Adams, Joyce and Stein, Pound and Eliot, Anand and Rushdie, Naipaul and Walcott, Patrick White and Germaine Greer bears ample testimony to the centripetal pull of the old European capitals and colleges, even as European world domination declined and was overtaken by a new epoch of American ascendancy.

As modern universities and the teaching of English spread unevenly across the British Empire, so too they spread across North America as the United States expanded westward and Canada confederated. The United States might have been a nation of immigrants of many languages and races, but the elite university system was overwhelmingly white, male, Protestant, and Anglophile. Nevertheless, despite ongoing attempts by writers, scholars, and cultural nationalists to promote a distinctive American literature in English, the teaching of that literature did not gain much headway in American universities until at least World War I. For the most elite institutions, an education in the classical languages remained an entry require-

ment across the century, and “English” in this period was a capacious term that generally designated an education in “modern” and “practical” subjects rather than an exclusive immersion in English letters. In their early stages, some American departments of English, like their counterparts in Ireland in my own undergraduate years in the early 1980s, could accommodate some non-English writers such as Ibsen or Chekhov, whose influence on modern literature was considered sufficiently “universal” to warrant their inclusion. Elizabeth Renker argues that when Johns Hopkins University inaugurated the higher graduate research degree in 1876, it reinvented American education because the Hopkins model was soon developed by the other leading universities and quickly multiplied the number of graduate enrollments in an age of galloping professionalization. Nevertheless, as Johns Hopkins modeled the new role of scholar-researcher in the humanities and in English particularly, it simultaneously marginalized American English literature as inferior. American literature, Renker contends, was kept out of scholarly classes for serious students and relegated to the most female-associated sections of the university that trained not scholar-researchers but schoolteachers. American literature, in other words, was designated a lower-level subject and first gained a foothold in the lower-tier American universities and not in the elite American institutions where classical and philological conceptions of literary scholarship were strongest. In a telling anecdote, Renker records how the first graduate course in American literature offered at Johns Hopkins was delivered in 1901–2 by Professor William Hand Browne. Browne’s subject was American literature before the Civil War, and his course’s purpose was to show “the reasons for the singular retardation of this literature while that of the mother-country moved with such steady progress” (Renker 2007: 28). Hopkins did not offer further graduate courses in the subject until 1923–24.

Well into the twentieth century, then, in elite university quarters, American literature was still considered as lacking in longevity, complexity, seriousness, and refinement compared to its English or British counterpart. Though several things contributed to the gradual change, World Wars I and II and the increasing global ascendancy of the United States appear to have contributed most to remaking this situation. These wars lent impetus to American cultural nationalism, and the United States’ increasing involvement in European and global affairs forced greater scholarly interest in “American civilization.” The rapid development of the American university and higher research in this era meant that American scholarship was also becoming increasingly significant in many fields and had to be taken seri-

ously. Nevertheless, despite these changes, the teaching of American literature made only spotty progress in the United States and in Europe in this period. For many scholars, within and outside of the United States, American literature continued to be regarded as essentially a provincial variant of British literature. Literary scholarship generally tended to accord higher prestige to the earliest periods of English literary development and to be more skeptical of the “new,” and even where American literature was recognized as distinctive, it seemed to many to be new and callow. The world wars, and World War II in particular, nevertheless impelled shifts in educational policy and brought universities generally under greater state directive control and gradually eroded this traditionalist bias toward the remoter periods. Still, in Britain, the European country that obviously shared the closest linguistic links with the United States, English department university syllabi rarely included American authors.

In an exhaustive two-volume study titled *American Studies in Europe* published in 1958, Sigmund Skard, a professor of American literature at the University of Oslo from 1946 to 1973, proposed that the publication in 1954 of a one-hundred-page special issue of the *Times Literary Supplement* titled “American Literature, Its Independence and Vigour” represented a watershed of sorts. The editorial, Skard wrote, was “a literary Declaration of American Independence”—literary independence on that count coming some 178 years after the signing of the American Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia in 1776 (Skard 1958: 94).<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, Skard also reported that postgraduate work on American literature, though possible in Britain, remained unusual, and few American authors other than Henry James or T. S. Eliot appeared on regular university English syllabi. In Germany, where the British and Americans dominated the postwar Allied occupation, American studies (as opposed to American literature) made more rapid strides and was deployed as part of a wider educational reform to

10. What Skard calls a Declaration of Literary Independence might better be considered a Royal Charter or License. Declarations of independence, political or literary, require not only a push from those seeking recognition of their autonomy but also metropolitan acknowledgment or concession of that autonomy. By 1954, the United Kingdom was weakened enough, and the United States sufficiently ascendant, and its literature sufficiently established, for the former mother country and the onetime colony now become world hegemon to come to new arrangements. However, American literature did not seek autonomy, which would have meant the establishment of American literature departments distinct from English literature ones, so much as more equitable copartnership in English departments.

connect Germany more firmly to “the West” as well as to cultivate stronger knowledge of American society and culture. In France, too, Skard found evidence of steady growth of American studies in the universities, but he also reported that, outside of the universities, few French people were able to read English easily (131–208, 209–357).

The slow and uneven processes by which American literature came to be a constitutive part of the syllabi in even well-resourced European countries, not to mention its gradual establishment in the English departments of the higher universities of the United States itself, shed interesting light on the fate of the anglophone literatures of the other anglophone-speaking countries. World War I might have paved the way toward American global ascendancy and stiffened American cultural nationalism, but it lent momentum also to anti-imperial struggles across the British Empire, and these to greater measures of independence from Britain in the dominions, too. In Ireland, World War I was followed by a militant war of independence that led to the partition of the island and the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1921. Moreover, the country had witnessed a literary revival (or renaissance) for several decades before 1921, a phenomenon that had attracted much attention in Britain, the United States, and further afield, and helped to make William Butler Yeats and the Abbey Theatre internationally famous. In 1922, the publication of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* marked a watershed in modern literary history; in 1923, Yeats won the Nobel Prize in Literature; in 1925, a second Irishman, George Bernard Shaw, won another. In sum, as Ireland asserted its claims for national autonomy and broadcast its anti-imperial credentials, it also produced another literature in English that, alongside American literature, offered its own bid for international recognition.

Buoyed up with the fervor of independence and new nationhood and basking in international attention for that literature, the fledgling Irish state might well have been expected to restructure its university English departments at that time to give more equal weight to Irish and British literatures as departments in the United States were then slowly beginning to do for American literature. After all, the English department was still relatively new in Ireland—Edward Dowden, the Shakespeare scholar, became the first elected professor of English literature in Trinity College Dublin in 1867—and Irish literature in English (or Anglo-Irish literature as it was then regularly termed) was older than its American equivalent. It could claim a continuous line of luminaries such as the Sheridans, Swift, Sterne, Goldsmith, Burke, Edgeworth, Thomas Moore, George Moore, Wilde, Shaw, Synge, Yeats, and Gregory, not to mention Joyce, still a controversial figure in the 1920s.

More radical thinking at the time might even have led to the creation of bilingual departments of Irish literature accommodating Irish literatures in both Gaelic and English. To have instituted changes of this kind in university teaching would have accorded “Irish literature” (meaning a literature written in Irish and English languages) a long premodern “classical” past and a pedigree richer than its English medievalist equivalent.

Nothing of the kind happened, however. Instead, the Irish universities corralled Gaelic or Irish literature into its own department, sometimes subdivided into departments of Sean- and Nua-Ghaeilge (Old and Modern Irish), while English departments continued to teach mainly British literature and retained a heavy emphasis on Old and Middle English in their curricula up until at least the 1980s or beyond. Though there are no published institutional histories to throw light on the development, an obvious explanation for this is that the Free State educational policy in that period was strongly influenced by the Gaelic League and was ideologically committed to making the country Irish-speaking or bilingual. In the circumstances, to have merged the teaching of Irish and English literatures into a single department might have appeared logical, but no doubt many Gaelic League enthusiasts would have argued that Irish language literature needed to safeguard its autonomy because it would otherwise always be subordinate in single department frameworks to English language literature. It seems likely that, whatever about government policy, disciplinary considerations may also have militated against integrated bilingual departments. Many of the leading scholars in English departments have continued since independence to be trained in Oxford or Cambridge or other British universities, and many of these would probably not have wanted to relinquish the wider international research and career networks open to them through the expanding world of English-only literature departments. A further complication was that scholarship in Sean-Ghaeilge especially was heavily influenced by German philology and quite different in orientation to the emerging versions of new and practical criticism emerging from the 1930s onward in English departments. Moreover, with few exceptions, there was little enough solidarity and much distrust between the two scholarly communities, each having its own kind of snobbery. The Gaelic literature scholars often tended to see Gaelic literature as the “real” national literature of Ireland, one belatedly usurped by an alien English, while the English literature scholars were often disposed to see themselves as more cosmopolitan and modern in professional terms than their colleagues working in Irish language departments.

The upshot was in many respects regrettable. As the American

research university with its much greater size and resources expanded after World War II, much of the very best scholarship on Irish writers such as Joyce, Yeats, Bowen, or Beckett was conducted in the United States or the United Kingdom, not in Ireland. Irish language classes were obligatory in the Irish primary and secondary school systems, but, for the vast majority of students, the language was rarely if ever used outside of the classroom and had little practical relevance to their ordinary lives.<sup>11</sup> As a result, student fluency standards in Irish at university level were typically weak, and as modern media technologies in English expanded and saturated everyday social life, they may have further declined in recent decades. Meanwhile, higher-level students in English departments were required to spend a great deal of time learning, sometimes by rote, Anglo-Saxon and Middle English purely for exam purposes. With so much tangled and confused British and Irish nationalistic language pieties to shoulder, the consequences for language acquisition generally or for serious higher research in either Irish or English literatures can hardly have been optimally productive.<sup>12</sup> Burdened by learning in primary and secondary education an Irish language they seldom or never used beyond school gates, and later by spending large parts of the BA degree studying basic Old and Middle English, second- or third-language acquisition, always demanding processes in any event, could seem a tiresome business associated only with arid grammars and exam grinds.

Small wonder, then, that in Ireland and elsewhere the sense of what constitutes Irish literature in English became much identified with twentieth-century writing. For university curricular and teaching purposes, Anglo-Irish literature was associated mainly with the Irish Revival and modernism, which meant a heavy focus on Joyce, Yeats, and Beckett. Figures from periods predating the later nineteenth century, such as Swift or Burke, were

11. For a comprehensive overview, see Crowley 2005, especially chaps. 6 and 7. In Crowley's view, the new Free State government fell into the "colonial education fallacy" by blaming the decline of Gaelic on the British education system and ignoring the economic imperatives driving anglicization. Consequently, that and future governments also looked to compulsory Irish language education to restore Gaelic as a vernacular, ignoring still the economic imperatives that stymied any such restoration.

12. General studies on the topic include Kelly 2002; Nic Pháidín and Uí Bhraonáin 2004; Walsh 2016. The point here, it needs to be stressed, is not that Irish universities do not produce high-quality research but rather that the specialist segregation of Irish and English literature study at the university level and the education system's policies on language teaching have histories worth investigation. There were roads not taken in the 1920s and later that might have produced very different results.

effectively ceded to British literature in curricular terms, even though Irish scholars have more recently made strong efforts to “re-Hibernicize” these and other figures by documenting their Irish influences and affiliations. However, everywhere outside of Ireland, even Joyce, Yeats, and Beckett are still commonly folded by most departments into “British literature,” while pre-twentieth-century figures such as Swift or Burke, Edgeworth or Thomas Moore, Wilde or Shaw remain even more firmly affixed to the British canon. Institutes of Irish studies were developed in Britain and the United States in the later decades of the twentieth century, and these now offer multidisciplinary offerings on Irish culture and society, usually with a strong focus on history and literature particularly. Irish studies institutes, however, are essentially annexes to larger university departments and face the usual organizational constraints confronting, say, African American studies or gender studies programs of loosely similar kind. In short, Irish studies programs have to coordinate operations—funding, hiring, teaching—with the more established humanities departments (especially English and history) around which they satellite. Despite the fact that there are now respected multivolume scholarly histories or anthologies of Irish literature that encompass several languages (typically Latin, Gaelic, and English), these have little practical consequence for the institutional organization of English departments generally. Neither in Ireland nor beyond its shores has there been any real “Declaration of Literary Independence” from Britain of the kind Skard thought the 1954 special issue of the *Times Literary Supplement* represented for American literature.

By all accounts, the former British Dominions might offer rather similar stories. English literary studies in all these countries appears to have been driven by a common agenda to establish British culture as the local dominant and to stress the greatness of the British tradition. Paul Martin notes that in Canada the elites saw British studies as a way to consolidate the Englishness of a country that had a significant francophone population, an aggressive American neighbor to the south, and, during the last half of the nineteenth century, a significant growth in immigration. As was the case elsewhere, for much of the nineteenth century, Canadian universities taught the classics; it was only in the 1880s that English and French literary studies acquired a prominent place in university curricula. However, after World War I, Martin notes, no subject enjoyed more prestige than English literature. But though Canadian literature courses (which meant Canadian English literature courses) had appeared in some universities as early as 1907, for most, including the most prestigious universities, the teaching of Eng-

lish literature remained deeply tied to the cultivation of imperial Britishness. Moreover, even those most sympathetic to the development of a national Canadian literature were not always committed to the idea of institutionalizing Canadian literature courses. Some academics believed that the best way to improve local literary standards was not to teach a still raw Canadian national literary corpus but to cultivate the English classics, which were, they believed, of a higher standard and offered more challenging models for emulation (Martin 2013).

Because of institutional resistance, therefore, it wasn't until the late 1960s and early 1970s, in a climate of post-Centennial enthusiasm, that Canadian literature courses really took off in Canadian universities. Even then, the study of "Canadian literature" remained commonly tied to a unilingual anglophone model of literary history, this reflecting a sense that Canada was a unilingual society with francophone culture assumed to be a minor, perhaps residual, phenomenon, something like Welsh in the United Kingdom or Gaelic in Ireland. Moreover, French Canadian education had taken its lead from French university practices and had evolved along quite different lines to its English counterpart, thus promoting divergent forms of scholarship and accreditation. Accordingly, in a situation not unlike Ireland's, "Canadian literature" essentially emerged as a tagged-on supplement to British literature, and despite a now well-established tendency to recognize the plurality of Canadian languages, francophone and anglophone Canadian literatures are usually taught unilingually and separately. Indeed, Martin remarked ruefully in his 2013 study, "As for the two literary solitudes of our country, the walls between francophone and anglophone scholars and scholarship seem thicker than ever" (xxi).<sup>13</sup>

A broadly similar if more exclusively anglophone history might be traced for Australia. There, too, university English was also charged with an anglicizing mission, and a combination of factors, ranging from deference to the British system, the tendency not to teach twentieth-century literature in both systems, and local misgivings about the quality of Australian literature, all delayed the development of extensive "Australian literature" courses. Some Australian literature was taught at the university level from the 1890s onward, largely without controversy because the courses were supplementary and did not affect the core business of English institutions (Dale 1997; Carter 2000; Callahan 2002).

When Australian literature finally did emerge in the 1970s and 1980s

13. Martin deals only slightly and in passing with the status of First Nation cultures.

as a subject of greater scholarly interest, it did so, however—and the same may be said for Irish literature, Canadian literature, and several other peripheral national Englishes—just as the whole discipline of English literary studies in the United States and Great Britain was being convulsed by a combination of theory wars, cultural and media studies, sexuality, gender, and minority studies, and other disciplinary innovations. In such circumstances, English departments in places like Ireland, Canada, Australia, or the Caribbean would find that the established conception of national literatures, fundamental since the early 1800s to the consolidation and promotion of the British and American literatures that by the late twentieth century now formed the core blocs of English department syllabi, was under challenge as never before. In a new era that saw the nation-state restructured to adjust it to transnational corporate capitalism and cultural globalization, national literary canons now became associated with a repressive or unrepresentative majoritarianism, a privileged masculinism, and a conservative and outmoded romantic nationalist politics. For the core British and American literatures to assimilate so many new disciplinary innovations would, as recent history shows, prove difficult enough. The sheer ferocity of the American “culture wars” of the 1980s and 1990s and the degree of media and government attention they commanded underline the passions that could be aroused, within and outside the academy, when the longer-established national literatures were compelled to respond to the demands of theory, multiculturalism, minority studies, identity politics and, by extension, to engage new student and faculty constituencies.<sup>14</sup>

For noncore national literatures in English, still trying to legitimate themselves, still trying to establish a literary criticism answerable to local conditions, still folded into the conventional business of English departments in tacked-on and ad hoc ways, these same challenges might be invigorating but also overwhelming. In other words, before they had ever even established anything like authoritative national literary canons to begin with, the noncore English literatures were now being invited to diversify their offerings well beyond teaching possibilities or even to dismantle canons altogether as a supposedly obvious evil. This was also the period when neoliberalist education policies and a rapid rise in short-contract university teaching really accelerated, thus adding even greater burdens onto departments trying to teach the standard English canon while catering now also

14. For some contributions to a much wider debate, see Bloom 1987; Graff 1992; Guilory 1993; Jay 1997.

to new minority writings, multiculturalism, and the local national literature. Small wonder that noncore English departments, as they attempted to deal with expanded canons and curriculum under increasingly adverse hiring and tenure conditions, would find it increasingly hard to define their mission and that so many issues would prove fractious.

The biggest challenge to the nineteenth-century and post–World War II conceptions of “English literary studies” and to departmental business as usual came, then, not from the noncore national literatures—whether of the Irish, Dominion, Caribbean, Anglo-Indian, African, or other kinds—all of which were fitfully institutionalized only late in the twentieth century, but from postcolonial studies, when the latter finally emerged as a distinct form of “theory” in the 1980s and crystallized into a designated field specialism sometime in the 1990s. In all the anglophone regions of the British Empire, there had been diverse forms of cultural critique that highlighted the relationship between English literature and the British imperial project, but postcolonial theory, for which Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) is usually cited as a foundational text, had a greater unsettling effect for any number of reasons. First, postcolonial theory, often censured by its critics for its ahistorical abstractions and generalizations, did not argue from the location of this or that society or particular national literature but spoke instead to the experience of colonized subjects everywhere. From a postcolonial perspective, furthermore, English literary writing was just one of a whole corpus of European discourses and knowledge regimes with a long history of imperial service. Second, whereas earlier anti-imperial literary critics from Ireland or India, Canada or the Caribbean, had often identified themselves as advocates for the development of their own emergent national literatures, postcolonial theorists did not so identify. Instead, they self-identified as the radical avant-garde of the new poststructuralism, discourse theory, Marxian theory, diaspora or minority studies formations that had been challenging some of the established practices of English studies in the wake of “French theory” in the United States and Great Britain especially. Third, whereas the critics associated with the new literatures in English or Commonwealth Literature were predominantly white, many of the leading postcolonial theorists hailed from the Middle East, India, the Caribbean, and Africa, and also sometimes, though rarely enough, from the indigenous nations within the settler societies. Many of those early leading critics—Said, Gayatri Spivak, Trinh T. Minh-Ha, Homi Bhabha, Gauri Viswanathan, Paul Gilroy, Neil Lazarus, Robert Young, David Lloyd, Simon Gikandi, Ato Quayson—were located in the elite English departments of the Anglo-American academy at

a time when inward migration from Britain's former nonwhite colonies had created significant diasporic communities within the United Kingdom and North America.

These circumstances sometimes created the impression that postcolonial theory, later termed postcolonial studies, was itself a product of British and American English departments. However, in reality, postcolonial theory was never a single-stranded theoretical formation but a congeries of overlapping critical projects taking inspiration from or loosely affiliated with a great variety of anticolonial struggles across the world. However, because its leading figures could speak with institutional authority from the Anglo-American center, a very different experience to that of writing from distant Dublin or Delhi, Melbourne or Toronto, Lagos or Kingston, postcolonial studies had an ability to speak for the margins of the anglophone world while enjoying the cultural capital of both "theory" and "world-class" elite research institutions in the core metropolitan anglophone states.<sup>15</sup>

One of the innovative distinctions of postcolonial studies, then, was that for the first time in English studies, intellectual voices hailing from the outer regions of the erstwhile British Empire, rather than from its metropolitan British core, were able to speak with high institutional authority on the nature of English studies and its complicities with empire. Though this scholarship was, as mentioned, mostly led by intellectuals themselves situated in core Anglo-American universities, questions of core-periphery relations of knowledge and power were now placed as never before on the discipline's intellectual agenda. World centers function best as centers when their centrality is regarded as "natural" or taken for granted; once it has become an object of study, the center has already begun to shed something at least of its assumptive aura of naturalness and inevitability.

Still, despite its many intellectual achievements, its partial success in forcing the discipline of English to take some account of its own involvements in the histories of empire, and the significant contribution it has made to the greater hiring of non-Caucasian scholars in the metropolitan universities, it is difficult to tell, nearly thirty years after its consolidation as a subfield, whether postcolonial studies has actually had serious revisionary impact on the organization or conception of English departments anywhere. Where, say, Irish or Canadian literatures were earlier institutionalized as latter-day supplements to English departments, so too postcolonial studies now also

15. The literature on postcolonial studies is too vast to cite here, but for useful overviews, see Lazarus 2004; Huggan 2013.

finds itself functioning as a kind of bagatelle appendage to such departments. In addition, courses offered under the postcolonial studies rubric are usually expected to cover the literatures of a great variety of quite different anglophone regions and cultures, this inevitably tending within the limits of the curriculum to compel teachers to select one or two authors from different regions, this in turn lending such syllabi an inevitably stretched survey-course quality. Furthermore, any number of other converging changes to Anglo-American university cultures, ranging from neoliberalization and humanities defunding to a contracting job market for graduates, or from the waning of “theory” and the routinization of the more insurgent fields of the 1980s and 1990s, have taken their toll. Today, postcolonial studies retains some traces of its earlier more insurgent moments, but it offers little substantive challenge in its present instantiation to the well-settled dominion of English and American literatures within nearly all English departments.

It might be fair to say, then, that what were once very old-style patrician Anglo-American imperial English departments now look, in the best instances at least, less like globe-girdling appendages of a British-American imperium and a little bit more like liberal imperial commonwealths, though these “commonwealths” are now embedded in universities increasingly functioning like globalized neo-imperial corporations. Much has changed in recent decades, but the sovereign place of English and American literatures in departments of English literature remains supreme, and the anglophone literatures of the other colonies and dominions find what place they can around the Anglo-American cores. Where once the “colored” nations within the British Commonwealth were counseled to have patience and told that when they were politically mature enough they would be granted self-government, today the unspoken assumption in most English departments is that the new non-British or non-American literatures in English also need time to mature to merit greater scholarly attention and that this process will evolve gradually. Perhaps like those early twentieth-century American, Canadian, Australian, or Irish scholars who held that their own national literatures remained rather callow, and that their students would therefore be better to immerse themselves in the more time-tried-and-tested English canons, largely the same assumptions hold today for African, Indian, and Caribbean Englishes, even if it is now on all sides less politic to say so.

### 3. The English Language Goes Global, and the English Department Goes Where?

However, if the fundamental structures of English departments have not moved or changed greatly, the world continues to change rapidly. Perhaps the most immediately significant change is the extraordinary acceleration of English language and, to a lesser extent, English literary teaching across the world in a late twentieth- and twenty-first-century context for which English has become the “access” language of our global economic system. In many countries in the former British Empire, the immediate aftermath of independence witnessed a surge of anti-British feeling that sometimes extended to the English language and its literature, these at that time regarded as having been the instruments of empire and a coerced anglicization. By the late twentieth century, however, this sentiment was already changing, and governments everywhere, from Eastern and Western Europe to Africa and Asia, were promoting English as a language of necessity and opportunity. From such perspective, English was the language that professional elites and service industry workers needed to master to compete for multinational corporate investment in their economies and to seize the opportunities made available by online globalized business. In the developing countries of Asia and Africa particularly, where the university education sector is expanding at levels that recall that of the American system after World War II, this has led to a rapid rise in corporate-driven English-language acquisition but also to a widening of English literature departments at a higher level. Writing on Cold War and post-Cold War English-language study, Robert Phillipson argues that in the late 1950s, the British Council shifted its focus from “cultural propaganda” based on the promotion of English literature to creating “a profession of English language teaching specialists,” who would become “a central feature of its strategy of educational aid aimed at sustaining Britain’s economic and political influence in Europe and what were rapidly becoming its former colonies” (Phillipson 1992: 173–222).<sup>16</sup> For the Americans, too, postwar language politics were conditioned by geopolitical ambitions, and Martin Kayman has argued that with the development of new computer and internet technologies, English language teaching was delinked from its associations with national cultures, British or American, and represented instead a naturalized “preferred lan-

16. For wider analyses of the connections between the history of the English language and empire, see Crowley 1991; Pennycook 1998.

guage of communication" (Kayman 2004: 12). The English language was being decoupled or deterritorialized from England or the United States and becoming a "global language" (Young 2008).

In his 2012 study, James F. English projected that India was at that time producing approximately 40,000 English graduates per year, "four times as many as in the United Kingdom," and he forecast that "at current rates of growth [that number] will surpass the United States by 2012" (English 2012: 33). China, English continued, had expanded its tertiary enrollment ratio in the same period at nearly three times the rate of increase in India and had become "the single largest motor of growth for global English studies." "In the early 1980s," English comments, "there were fewer than 20,000 English majors in China. By 1996, that number had topped 50,000, and today it is estimated to be over 500,000, more than twice as many as in the United States and about 10 times as many as in the United Kingdom" (34–35). Were one to add to this extraordinary growth rate the other East Asian countries with well-resourced universities and well-developed curriculum in English, the fast-growing if underfunded university system in anglophone Africa, the consolidation of older English departments and American studies departments in Europe, and expanding university sectors and English department enrollments in South America, then, English observed, it would have to be concluded that, viewed from a global perspective, "English is a growing rather than a shrinking discipline" (35). The expansion of English language instruction and anglophone literature study is, in short, now "an integral part of an ongoing and unprecedented boom in the world's tertiary educational system" (35).

What does any of this mean for the Western universities and for the future of their English departments? "The flower of art blooms only where the soil is deep" and thus "it takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature" was Henry James's controversial remark in his volume on Hawthorne in 1879 about what appeared to him to be the inevitably slow development of the literature of the United States in the nineteenth century (James [1879] 1968: 3). Perhaps James is right, and if so, this means that new literatures in English everywhere will take a long time to ripen. Or, perhaps the evidence of his own career and those of his American contemporaries testifies against James because in hindsight one might argue that American literature was already making much faster headway in terms of quality and reputation than James's 1879 assessment appeared to allow for. After all, within a few decades, young Americans such as T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound would be loudly declaiming the decrepitude of domestic Eng-

lish letters and asserting from London their capacity to take over the English literary scene. However much English departments remained, as we noted earlier, resistant to the teaching of American literature before 1945, in the decades after World War I, that literature enjoyed a far greater prominence with reading publics in Europe than it had heretofore. And once the United States became a global hegemon after World War II, it used its new clout to increase European intellectual respect for “American civilization.”<sup>17</sup> It is hard to tell, then, whether it indeed takes “a great deal of history to produce a little literature” and whether an increase in English language teaching and enrollments in a growing number of English departments globally will in our time yield only a slow and gradual development of ambitious anglophone literatures beyond the current anglophone core regions or whether robust new English literatures will soon bloom on all continents. If twentieth-century precedents are anything to judge by, the apparently slow growth of a particular English literature—of the kind Henry James attributed to American literature—may be suddenly accelerated when the world-system falls into turmoil and new nation-states assume greater roles on the world stage, as the United States did between 1914 and the end of the Cold War. Perhaps change will come even sooner in the opposite direction and globalization will render the now-core anglophone countries, whose national languages have only relatively recently been nationally standardized in any case, far more robustly polylingual—thanks to inward migration—than they have been since the Middle Ages. After all, as English language acquisition is taken up in all corners of the globe, migrants from those regions also move into the United States and the United Kingdom, and the linguistic futures of those countries may hold their own surprises.

The long-term future nearly always defies prediction, but already some things are clear. More than ever, though the phenomenon is nothing new, the English language has become an educational commodity, a resource bought and sold by universities to students willing to pay to achieve basic competence in it. Before World War II, Britain had a monopoly on teaching English as a second language; today, the United States is increasingly invested in this lucrative business. In such circumstances, knowledge of linguistics and second-language teaching methods will almost certainly be in much greater demand quantitatively than competencies in high cultural theory or aesthetics. However, the acquisition of new languages is a costly and time-consuming process, and what many con-

17. On this topic, see Berghahn 2001.

stituencies in non-anglophone regions want or “need” is not a deep immersion in English literature but a basic competency in English as a second language to manage business or interpersonal transactions. How this kind of demand for a basic functional competency in “global English” will change English literature departments at a time when even the most elite institutions are increasingly providing basic competency skills in writing to their own undergraduates—this delivered by means of low-wage, short-term, or no-contract instructors—is unclear, though again the general indicators are clear enough. Even within the elite core anglophone universities, the teaching of literature, as opposed to functional language competencies, is already an elite practice.<sup>18</sup>

The English department’s answer to this to date has been to try to maintain business more or less as usual in terms of British and American literatures and to convert “postcolonial studies” into “world literature,” conceived essentially as English world literature or “global anglophone literature.” This is essentially a strategy to elasticate the previous “postcolonial studies” subfield belatedly tagged on to the longer-established British and American spine of the English department in the 1990s, so that this widened category net might somehow catch whatever new writers or literatures may emerge in this vastly expanded field for the twenty-first century. The flimsiness of this response, which can hardly be called a strategy, need hardly be underlined. Postcolonial studies had served, before its sidelining to “global anglophone” or “world literature,” to diversify a little the faculty and curricula of English departments, even as those departments have come to look ever more like a remarkably hierarchical imperial commonwealth, with the British and American literatures and their teachers in positions of highest privilege, other outer-region anglophone literatures orbiting around them, the specialists in these literatures hoping to find some refuge in what looks increasingly like a jerry-built structure inherited from the post–World War II era. The attempts by Bill Readings, Christopher Newfield, Henry Giroux, Stefan Collini, and so many scholars in recent decades to defend the autonomy of the modern university and the value of the humanities in the face of relentless corporate intrusion and or right-wing populist attack is to be honored. However, to think strategically about the future of any aspect of higher education, and certainly of English literary teaching and scholar-

18. See Watts 2011: chap. 11; Ricento 2015. On composition and writing programs in the United States, see Bousquet et al. 2004. On the more instrumental uses of English, see Emre 2017.

ship, it seems increasingly necessary to situate the contemporary crises of both the wider institution and its disciplines more particularly in a broader geopolitical and geocultural world-system that is now changing so significantly from its previous restructuration in the 1940s and 1950s. The rise of the modern English department as we know it—its institutional structures, professional organizations, field categories and associations, canons, curricula, and convictions—is inseparable from, even if not reducible to, the history of the transition from British to American world hegemony. Today, English is—as Latin was to early Christendom or Arabic is to the Islamic world—the sacred language of neoliberalism. However, as American ascendancy falters and the crises of neoliberalism become more grotesquely acute, the time, if it has not already passed, for some cool-minded and considered reckoning with the history of the English department and its possible futures seems overdue.

#### **4. New Literatures, New Eras, New Departments?**

Several questions and some propositions, perhaps provocations, follow from this inevitably reductively schematic historical sketch. Let us begin with the questions, most of which receive almost no attention in contemporary English department scholarship. What is the relationship between an increasingly expansive “global language” and the various literatures it nurtures? As a language expands its reach to straddle the planet, do the literatures nurtured by “global English” in all its forms improve in quality as well as number, or is there little if any connection between these things? Does the worldwide expansion of English serve as a stimulus to non-English literatures or deplete them? Or do neither? Have English departments in places like Ireland, Canada, Australia, Africa, the Caribbean, or India served as support systems for and stimulants to the cultivation of English literatures in these regions or acted as brakes or inhibitors to such cultivation because they institutionalize deference to the core British and American literatures? When earlier literary scholars in Canada, to return to an earlier-mentioned example, discouraged the teaching of Canadian literature because they believed that for Canadian students and would-be writers to immerse themselves in the more developed British tradition would ultimately set the bar higher for Canadian literary achievement, were those scholars thinking as misguided provincials? Or were they just being intelligently modest and far-seeing, realizing that the cultivation of an accomplished national literature

cannot be rushed or engineered into being? Do most scholars of English in Ireland, Africa, or Australia, say, believe that maintaining the centrality of the British canon is still important for such reasons, even if it is less fashionable to say so now? And, finally, to think in terms of employment opportunities, if English is expanding constantly as a global language, and as a medium of new technologies, why have English departments been able to make such little “hay” of this “sunshine”? What is it about their disciplinary common sense or organizational forms that has meant that even as the language that is their fundamental medium expands so dramatically, these departments sink deeper into crisis, however interpreted? The value of any discipline cannot be measured solely in terms of its instrumental usefulness to employment or the economy, but the apparent discrepancy between the worldwide expansion of the English language and the declining importance of the English department in the wider ecology of the university ought at least to invite serious consideration.

Now to some propositions. To begin with, it should be clear that if there is a “crisis” in English departments today, there is no singular crisis nor a general one that can be adduced simply by taking the leading American or British departments as exemplars. Nor is the current crisis simply one of contracting student enrollments or falling tenured employment for graduates. Chronic though these situations are, they must be considered in a wider international context of an accelerating “global English” and its attendant consequences. The challenges that English departments in, say, India, Kenya, or South Korea confront are probably not categorically different to those that their counterparts confront in the United States, Canada, or Germany, but diverse national histories and the different statuses of English language and literature in these different regions relative to other languages and literatures nevertheless generate significantly different predicaments. This may be a wholly obvious point, but with the commendable exception of James F. English’s *The Global Future of English Studies*, it is one that receives scant if any recognition in the leading academic scholarship on the university humanities or in major language associations such as the MLA or in journals such as the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Times Literary Supplement*, or *London Review of Books* that sometimes attend to these matters. This blindness of the anglophone center toward the anglophone peripheries and the consequent tendency to universalize the American or British situations is, as Pascale Casanova has argued, typical of the literary world-system, but it holds true for academic research and critical

scholarship also (Casanova 2004).<sup>19</sup> Because of the historic importance of British and American universities and literary scholarship to the cultivation of English studies everywhere, and because the major university presses or journal stables that publish such work tend also to be American- and British-based corporate conglomerates or university presses, this Anglo-American-centric metropolitan perspective is deeply institutionalized and carries extensive privileges rarely debated even in postcolonial studies. Questions about diversifying the canon or faculty to provide more room in the English department inn for noncore Englishes rarely if ever lead to any serious debates about the historical or future structures of the English department as such.

The way in which English departments have most commonly responded to new challenges since World War II has been persistently to expand the scope of what they attempt to teach and research. As successive new demands have emerged for the teaching of national “minority” literatures such as women’s writing, queer writing, African American or indigenous literatures, or for the teaching of new theories like affect studies or new technologies like digital humanities, departments everywhere have reacted, often with impressive organizational agility, even if usually with less philosophical-critical reflection, in mostly additive fashion. In other words, they have struggled to retain as much as possible of the core curriculum while opening new subject options and degree pathways. Given the current rate with which “global English” is expanding on every continent and the likelihood that new literatures are emerging or will soon do so in the wake of such development, and the prospect that these are being disseminated on the back of wholly new as well as old modes of transmission, it seems quite implausible to imagine that merely additive strategies can ever hope to cope with the range and scale of challenges ahead. More specifically, it seems unlikely that English departments as now constituted can ever really accommodate the serious study of new literatures in English into the future without risking absurd levels of overstretch or incoherence.

If, to speculate for a moment, there were to be some twenty-first-century “renaissance” of Nigerian, Indian, and Australian Englishes, ones roughly equivalent, for argument’s sake, to the largely contemporaneous Harlem and Irish Renaissances at the start of the twentieth century, could English departments as currently composed really hope to do these “renais-

19. On the significance of global English to the articulation of contemporary notions of “world literature,” see Mufti 2016.

sances" justice? If, on the other hand, there were to be some acknowledged decline in the standard of British or American writing from, say, 2000 to 2030, would English departments reflect this by downgrading the representation levels of those literatures and upgrading that of Nigerian or Indian or Australian Englishes? Or would institutional inertia and a lack of commitment to questions of quality mean that British and American literatures would still continue to receive much more attention due to the inbuilt bias of English departments in favor of that foundational British "mother literature" and its now-dominant American partner?

One radical and certainly controversial solution to the growth of "global English" might be to envisage some future splitting of English departments into two separate if related segments much in the way that "classics" departments used to be split into autonomous or semiautonomous Greek and Roman sections. This would see English departments split into separate units of, say, English literature pre-1800 or "Classical English" and English literature post-1800 or "Modern English." "Classical English" departments would then focus mainly on the English literatures of Great Britain and its earliest anglophone colonies in the period up to the French Revolution. This is to select a convenient if Eurocentric watermark, but the Indian Rebellion of 1857 might constitute another possible marker if one wanted to break in the mid-nineteenth century instead and to begin with the "rise of Asia" more generally. As such, "Classical English" would cover nearly twelve centuries of writing from the Anglo-Saxon chronicles and epics up to or slightly beyond the age of Edmund Burke, Mary Wollstonecraft, and the English Romantic poets. This would deal with literatures in English before English was already a "global language," though, as noted earlier, predictions that it would become such were already becoming common. "Modern English" would, in contrast, cover a much smaller temporal span of scarcely more than two centuries, but this would allow for a more manageable, if still formidably challenging, geocultural coverage of the multiple new literatures in English that developed in this period everywhere from Ireland and the United States to India, Australia, the Caribbean, and Africa. "Classical English" departments would thus cover a vast temporal stretch and a smaller territorial one, "Modern English" (or "anglophone") departments, in contrast, a far more sprawling territorial remit but a shorter temporal span.

In this institutional overhaul, British and American literatures would remain quite central at least for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, the noncore literatures in English would no longer be merely tagged on as the bagatelles of "anglophone world literature" or "postcolo-

nial studies,” and all sorts of interesting possibilities for the study of changing core-periphery literary relations might be developed in this new institutional space. Because so many of the anglophone literatures of the former colonies of the British Empire developed under the impress of but also in reactions against metropolitan English (and European) literature, it is easy to imagine how the study of that literary history might be conducted on broad comparative transnational bases rather than in case by case national silos. Many of the new English languages and literatures that have emerged in the late twentieth century owe far more to the influence of American imperialism and mass media and to corporate “catch-up” pressures driven by terrific financial and other crises than to historic British imperial influence.<sup>20</sup> In these cases, there would be real opportunities to study contemporary American core-periphery literary and linguistic transactions also and thereby to decenter post-World War II American literature in ways only moderately attempted to date. Such a radical overhaul would, of course, raise its own serious problems and objections and force related overhauls in systems of professional organization and academic publishing.

The most obvious objection to proposals for “Classical” and “Modern” English departments is that this would simply lead to disciplinary fragmentation and serious loss of historical continuity. To many, a “Modern English” literature department that had surrendered Shakespeare to “Classical English” would be to attempt to stage *Hamlet* without the prince or, same thing, *Endgame*. Any weakening to the English department in its current form as might be incurred by such splitting at a time when humanities education is already under fire is a serious matter for concern. Against this, such losses as a division would necessitate might be compensated for over the longer term by the eventual gains in terms of greater scholarly depth enabled by more concentrated study in disciplinary reaches now already massive in scope. Just as Greek and Roman studies never precluded ambitious scholars from working across these two fields, neither need an institutional split prevent English scholars in “Classical” and “Modern” departments from working intelligently across both segments. An obvious objection is that at a time when underfunded universities are already struggling to maintain the humanities, they are unlikely to want to support two English departments when they seem currently disinclined properly to

20. For an instructive account that describes how the growth in English in South Korea in recent decades was driven by the Asian financial crisis of 1977 and corporate catch-up, see Piller and Cho 2015.

fund one. To this the necessary counter is that “success” has its costs: if English is today’s runaway “global language,” the lingua franca of the sciences and new internet and computer media as well as of business, then the study of that language in all its forms needs more resources, not less. English language scholars, not least in Britain and the United States, have too often presented themselves to their publics as victims of “crisis,” pleading their distresses to uninterested ears, rather than as scholars equipped, or who might equip themselves, to engage with one of the most complex developments in world language spread since Latin. In any event, it seems unreasonable to expect departments originally designed to teach the literature of one country, England, and then stretched to include the literature of one country and one demicontinental state, the United States, to research, study, and teach the literatures of a now nearly planetary “global English” without a serious structural overhaul to equip them for that task.

A further obvious objection might be that even were such a splitting of English departments possible or desirable, this might still work far better for elite metropolitan departments in the better-heeled American or British metropolises than elsewhere. In situations where English departments are relatively small units, any such splitting might patently be disastrous. However, in the case of less wealthy noncore regions with longer histories of writing in English, perhaps other experiments might work better and in so doing diversify the larger international ecology of the English department even more. If Ireland and Canada—to return once again to two earlier-mentioned examples—never sought their “Declarations of Literary Independence” in the way Skard argues that American literature did in the 1950s, has that moment passed forever? Or, should or could such declarations still be contemplated? If Ireland in the 1920s did not try to imagine how a bilingual department of Irish writing (in English and Irish literatures) might be developed, is it now possible a century later to contemplate such propositions? If Canadians are ever to escape the separate “literary solitudes” of their distinct anglophone and francophone literary departments, might not some bilingual departments of “Canadian literature” be essayed in that country? Likewise, would the literatures of the contemporary Caribbean be better studied in multilingual “Caribbean literature” departments that engaged with all the languages and literatures of that region rather than having the English, French, Spanish, and Dutch versions of West Indian literature now boxed separately as the late accretions of their representative metropolitan “mother-literatures”?

The counterargument here is that mergers of literature departments

of this sort would all too conveniently facilitate the downsizing of the humanities already underway in many parts of the world. From the point of view of scholarship, some might also object that different linguistic and literary traditions can be collectively amalgamated into a single unit or “school” without generating really substantive cross-lingual or scholarly exchange. How much intellectual traffic is there between specialists in Italian and German literatures even when they work in single comparative literature departments? How much exchange between specialists in Arabic and Persian or Latin or Celtic literatures in cognate humanities language programs? These objections have serious merits. Still, it must also be remembered that the expansion of “global English” is far from a win-win situation where other languages are concerned, and many are already losing ground to anglicization. As new social media and other technologies proliferate and English becomes the required medium of capitalist enterprise and scientific research, smaller languages everywhere are receding at pace. Might not committed bilingual or multilingual departments in anglophone nation-states with more than one vernacular language find ways to cultivate the more vulnerable languages and literatures, even as they also devote more attention to the under-studied phenomenon of “global English” than traditional English departments with their overwhelming British and American concentrations have done?

In the situation conceived here, universities in Ireland, Canada, or the Caribbean region might still, could they afford to do so, retain inherited and more traditional “English departments” (more properly, departments of British and American literatures) that would continue to teach mainly British and American literatures. However, they might also, or instead, if necessary, promote new “Irish” or “Canadian” or “Caribbean” literature departments specializing in the multilingual training of students in their designated literatures. Such new departures would obviously remain for some time works in progress because in all these nation-states qualified scholars with bilingual or multilingual language and literary competencies are likely few in number. Nevertheless, all bold change requires daring, resources, imagination, and time, and if the only alternatives are a resigned fatalism to the ongoing spread of “global English” and to the overstretch of the English department as currently constituted, then some radical structural thinking and experiment may be warranted.

To some, maybe many, these latter suggestions will seem outrageous, a conservative throwback to an outdated nineteenth-century literary nationalism. However, there is nothing inevitably nationalistic about the

teaching of national literatures, especially where these can be taught in two or more languages. Besides, a much greater diversity of English department modular structures in different regions of the world might actually represent a proper decolonization of English studies as well as create a much more thoroughgoing diversity of scholarly projects and intellectual expertise. Indeed, a more thoroughgoing diversification not of syllabi but of department structures and missions might even contribute to a revitalization of job opportunities. Currently, English departments the world over, most designed to look roughly like inherited British and American models, turn out graduate students all more or less equipped in the same ways with scholarly credentials that largely conform to fields and categories instituted by the American MLA. Small wonder that the market for these young scholars is so terrifically glutted. Moreover, those who object that departments of “Irish” or “Australian” or “Caribbean” literature would represent a nationalist throwback ought not to hide from themselves the fact that English departments as currently constituted in increasingly state-directed or privately owned corporate universities already serve the interests of American, British, and “global English” world hegemony—this despite the sincere anti-imperialist commitments of many of their faculties. There is no “pure” or uncompromised political ground to occupy anywhere on these issues; all forms of organization have political implications.

A few final points need to be made. It is scarcely to be wondered at that the works of some of the great critics of modern English and American literature, from Matthew Arnold to T. S. Eliot to F. R. Leavis to Raymond Williams, or from F. O. Matthiessen to Leslie Fiedler to Susan Sontag to Ann Douglas, should be informed by their authors’ national situations and betray some of the consequent blindnesses and insights that follow from this. This does not mean that such critics are the literary equivalents of the Curzons, Dyers, MacArthurs, or Perrys of their nations and that English and American literatures or criticisms are simply imperialist in nature. The various radical Enlightenment, romantic anticapitalist, classical republican, socialist, liberal humanist, liberal and left feminist, and queer critical heritages that have fed into “English studies” have usually offered some check to the more overtly cultural nationalist and imperialist ideologies that also shaped the cultures of British and American English departments. The generous internationalist scope and ambition of the works of such distinguished American or American-based literary scholars as Edmund Wilson, Richard Ellmann, Fredric Jameson, Edward Said, or Gayatri Spivak, to mention only a tiny and random few, deserve to be honored. So too do the remarkable contributions

of many distinguished American and British scholars, past and present, to our understanding of Irish, Caribbean, African Anglophone, and other literatures. Time and again, English studies in Britain and in America especially has been revitalized by non-anglophone sources: by the immigration of European scholars fleeing Nazi or Communist rule in Europe after World War II, by the assimilation of so-called French theory after the 1960s, more recently by the assimilation of the literatures and scholarship of the “postcolonial world.” By the same token, however, the noncore Englishes have also been adding value to their domestic literatures and scholarship by taking from the center for their own purposes, and this means that the time has or must soon come when the absolute centrality of the American and British core of English studies needs to be challenged more, not less.

This essay’s intended purpose, then, is not to open up another seam of peripheral grievance or to contribute to a situation where American and British scholars are regarded as the “imperial enemy” by scholars of other literatures in English. That way nonsense lies. The subject of inquiry here is not individual scholars or even knowledge regimes or critical methods but department and institutional structures, potentials, and possibilities. Thus, even in those cases where the patronage and goodwill shown by English departments in the United States or Great Britain toward other anglophone literatures is wholly commendable, benefaction is not the same thing as more equitable exchange. Despite many remarkable changes at the disciplinary level, English departments today look something more like the Anglo-American imperial commonwealths imagined in the late nineteenth century by Dicey, Carnegie, or Stead than to anything that might properly be termed postimperial. Moreover, it is as fatuous for scholars of the peripheral literatures in English to look to the British and American English language and literature associations to redeem this situation as it would have been a century ago for Irish, Indian, Caribbean, Canadian, or Nigerian nationalists to look to Westminster or Washington to gift them independence. This is not how change happens.

Nevertheless, change does happen, sometimes by careful planning and intelligent design, more often when forced on institutions by social pressures or world-rending historical crises. Today, after several decades of neoliberal ravagings of higher education, of internet and other technological revolutions, of anticolonial, women’s, African American, minority, and ethnic insurgencies of all kinds, the English department structures inherited from the post–World War II settlements are in trouble. Neither hasty and panicky nor minimalist and sluggish responses to that trouble are likely to

help much in the decades ahead; intelligent long-term projects of restructuring and renewal that place the serious study of literatures and languages at their core promise better results. As Renker and others have shown, it was not at Harvard or Yale but at Johns Hopkins that the American model of doctoral graduate studies was initially developed, this innovation then forcing change in more tradition-bound universities elsewhere. Likewise, if Renker is right, it was not at Johns Hopkins that the teaching of American literature gained its earliest strides but in the smaller, less prestigious American teacher-training colleges. If today the leading English departments even in the wealthiest core regions feel themselves to be in acute crisis, then perhaps this situation owes something not just to external forces but to the failure of English departments worldwide to think more boldly and internationally for themselves. Given their combined numbers and strength across the various continents, English literary critics everywhere ought not to be without some means to confront with greater cross-national collaborative muscle and ingenuity the momentous challenges and opportunities opened up by “global English” in a fast-changing world-system itself in transitional crisis. Some preparedness to consider new ways as to how English departments are organized might also create the opportunity to undo the wretchedly stratified and unconscionably exploitative modes of employment that current departments have sustained for several decades. New beginnings with real postimperial and postneoliberal ambition for the still relatively new century? If past evidence is any indicator for the future, incipient changes are perhaps already underway in what seem now the least predictable places.

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